

Crossing Borders:

Two U.S. Corrections Efforts Offer Aid to Haitian Prison System

By Vanessa St. Gerard

For the past 18 months, the National Penitentiary Administration of the Caribbean nation of Haiti has endured the arduous task of rebuilding its correctional system. Around Feb. 29, 2004, all the country's prisons were left empty as a result of political instability, and ever since, Haitian officials have worked to bring the prisons to livable standards. With the help of members of the American Correctional Association, who have donated their time, efforts and expertise, the Haitian National Penitentiary Administration so far has restored 16 of the 21 prisons and most recently received an enormous shipment of medical and office supplies donated by American correctional agencies.

Haiti in Brief

Haiti is located southeast of Cuba in the Western Caribbean. The nation, which is about the size of Maryland, shares an island with the Dominican Republic and is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean and on the south by the Caribbean Sea.

Populated with about 8.3 million people, Haiti commemorated its bicentennial of independence in 2004. However, that year started off with violence and turmoil, resulting in President Jean-Bertrand Aristide leaving office in February 2004. In the following weeks, among other violence, rebel forces destroyed many of the nation's prisons and jails. According to Marc Wilkens Jean, director of the National Penitentiary Administration, riots ensued and the correctional facilities were attacked, some of them being set on fire while others were otherwise damaged. The entire prison system collapsed; all the country's inmates had escaped.

The Human Rights Watch's 2005 World Report described Haiti's prison and jail conditions, as of November 2004, as "dire." Many detention facili-

ties were still not in functioning condition, the report states, and those that did hold inmates were generally dirty and crowded, and often lacked sanitation facilities.

As constitutionally mandated, police officers staff the nation's prisons. According to the Haitian constitution, the National Penitentiary Administration is a specialized unit of the Haitian National Police under the umbrella of the Justice Ministry. Therefore, the director of the National Penitentiary Administration reports directly to the director general of the Haitian National Police. While the U.N. Development Program has been working with Haitian corrections officials with regard to staff training, Jean says that there are three technical correctional advisers with whom he has been working in efforts to rebuild the system — two Canadians and American Ronald Edwards.

Getting Involved

ACA's first steps toward bringing aid to the Haitian correctional system began when the Association approached Edwards, a long-time ACA member, to take part in a U.S. government program that involved American correctional staff working in Haiti. According to ACA Executive Director James A. Gondles, Jr., ACA has a partnership with Civilian Police International (CPI), which places law enforcement personnel in other nations on behalf of the U.S. government. The U.S. State Department was seeking corrections personnel to work in Haiti, and CPI solicited ACA to help find the ideal candidate.

Edwards, a 31-year corrections veteran, began his career as a correctional officer in Ohio. By the time he retired from his position of regional director with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction in 2000, Edwards had served as warden of four facilities, president of the Ohio Correc-

tions and Court Services Association, and was honored with the North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents Warden of the Year award in 2000.

Given Edwards' extensive correctional background, as well as his leadership skills, ACA sought after him for the corrections mission in Haiti. "I was around him a lot and I was just impressed with his professionalism, his demeanor, the way he carried himself, the way he speaks and his belief in corrections," Gondles said. "He's what I would term a natural leader." Gondles says he was aware of the situation that was going on in Haiti and was confident that Edwards was the right choice. "They needed stability and they needed knowledge. They needed professionalism and they needed experience, and he possesses all those things," Gondles said. "I told him that there were leaders in corrections and there were followers, and he was a leader and we needed someone that could represent professionalism in Haiti."

"I kind of followed what was going on in the Caribbean in regards to Haiti ... and I talked to several people at ACA before I made the decision," Edwards said. So on July 16, 2004, after signing a one-year contract with CPI, Edwards arrived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, to begin his work.

The Assignment

Edwards works directly with the director of the prison system, providing technical advice to him. "He is trying to find out the needs of the Penitentiary Administration and he proposes ideas and discusses them with the [U.S.] embassy," Jean explained. "He gives advice concerning security and also advises on ways to improve the conditions of the prisons. ... He helps as much as he can." Edwards says the proposals he has made include construction projects to



Inmates from the Broward County Sheriff's office helped pack the supplies that were presented to Haitian prison officials on May 25.

enhance and improve prison security within the scope of obtainable resources. "My work includes daily on-the-spot assessment/advice and consultation to all prison staff members throughout Haiti," Edwards said. "I'm working with people that truly want to move forward. They are very passionate about their employment, they want to do the right thing and they are very supportive and very open to advice."

Prison administrators with whom Edwards has worked include Jean, who took office in August 2005; Claude Théodat, the former director of the National Penitentiary Administration; and even the director general of the Haitian National Police. "The director general, I've had several contacts with him and he's very supportive of what I'm doing and he's never hesitant to tell me that," Edwards said.

Although Haiti's largest prison is located in Port-au-Prince, Edwards' hectic work schedule includes traveling throughout Haiti to evaluate the situation in all the nation's prisons, which can become dangerous given the country's instability. "Personal security does dictate where and how I do business on a daily business," Edwards said. "On many days, my schedule may be interrupted by unrest or violence that exist in this unstable environment."

However, Edwards says the precarious environment is not his biggest challenge. "I feel pretty good about my security situation," he said. Edwards lives in an international community in the town of Pétienville, located a few miles southeast of the capital. "I think the communications has been very

good in terms of letting us know if and where situations may be difficult to go in, so we just avoid those areas."

What Edwards views as most challenging is dealing with the crowding situation and the rising inmate population. "I think that some of the biggest problems and issues I deal with ... [is] the ever-rising population," he said. "The population is ever-increasing, so the goal and our objective is to be able to meet that rising population by having these facilities reconstructed, restored and brought back on line." By mid-June, 16 months after all the prisons were vacated, the inmate population had reached about 2,300, according to Jean.

Since Edwards' arrival in July 2004, more than 10 facilities have been brought back on line, bringing the total of operational prisons, as of mid-June, to 16, Jean reports. "This is the very first mission I've been on and I have not been disappointed," Edwards said. "This has been very challenging and an extremely interesting situation for not only me, but my family as well." Edwards has returned home to Ohio numerous times during his corrections mission, and his wife and three sons have made the trip to Haiti on a few occasions to visit him.

Although his initial contract with CPI was for one year, Edwards has contracted with Pacific Architects and

Engineers — another government services company providing support to the State Department — to extend his mission in Haiti for another year. "What makes my job here so exciting and gratifying is the fact that I work within my lifelong element of correc-

tions, and I can satisfy my passion to help and improve the correctional system here unlike any other environment I've ever worked," Edwards said.

Bringing More Assistance

During the time that Edwards had been providing hands-on aid to officials in Haiti, correctional staff in the United States were doing their part in an effort to send much-needed supplies to the National Penitentiary Administration. The project to collect both medical and office supplies to send to Haiti was headed by ACA's International Relations Committee. Elizabeth Gondles, Ph.D., International Relations Committee member and president of the Institute for Criminal Justice Healthcare, got the idea with Warden Burl Cain while touring the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola about two years ago. Dr. Gondles says that she was touring Cain's facility when the idea came to her. "Over in one corner of this one section of the prison, there were some wheelchairs and some excess stuff," she explained, which came as a result of a facility program that refurbishes wheelchairs. she continued: "And I looked at [Cain] and I said, 'there are so many people that need this stuff' and then we looked at each other and we gave birth to the idea."

Dr. Gondles said she began the effort through her Institute for Criminal Justice Healthcare, whose mission is to integrate public health and justice systems, and later approached then ACA President Charles J. Kehoe with the idea. According to International Relations Committee Chair Dr.

John May, Kehoe requested that the committee develop a mechanism through which U.S. correctional agencies contribute resources and donations to their colleagues in developing countries.

May, medical director for Armor Correctional Health Services at the Broward County Jail in Florida, selected Haiti as one of the first recipients of such supplies because of the previous work he has done in that nation. May founded and serves as medical director of "Health through Walls," which, according to its Web site, is a project of the Institute for Criminal Justice Healthcare that has provided technical assistance, training, resources, supplies and direct patient care ser-

vices to prisons in economically disadvantaged countries, including Haiti. "I've been working in Haiti since 2001," May said, adding that when the International Relations Committee was charged with the project, "Haiti was a natural selection." Haiti's proximity to Florida, as well as its high rates of poverty and infectious diseases also influenced May's decision, he said, adding: "Their prisons are often the last on everyone's priority list. ... The staff and the systems in many developing countries are very professional and dedicated to doing the right thing, but often do not have the resources."

By around January 2004, collections had begun, kicking off a campaign lasting more than a year to

supply what Haitian prison officials had requested. The amassed supplies varied from file cabinets and desk chairs to a refrigerator and an X-ray machine, processor and developing solutions. "Part of what we tried to collect were items that they said that they needed, so we tried to meet their needs," May said. He says donations for the large container were solicited from different agencies, including the Broward County Sheriff's Office, the Florida Department of Corrections and several private vendors throughout Florida. "We were able to fill the container from solicitation that I had done on behalf of the International Committee to local businesses and organizations here in South Florida, some of

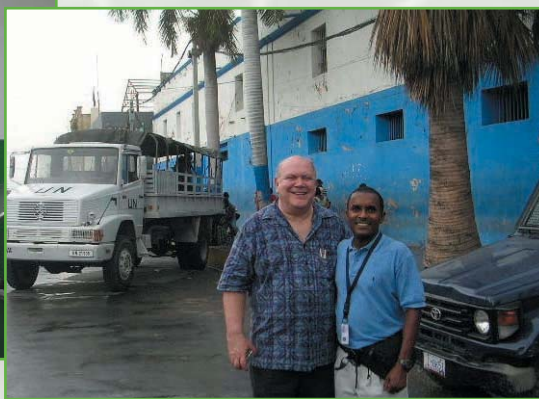


Top: From left to right, James A. Gondles, Jr., Elizabeth Gondles, Gwendolyn C. Chunn and Ronald Edwards with a U.N. peacekeeper from Brazil.



Bottom: From left to right, Jean Pierre Elie, medical director of the Haitian Prison Service, Elizabeth Gondles, Marc Wilkens Jean, Gwendolyn C. Chunn and John May.





(Left) The ACA delegation to Haiti included Elizabeth Gondles, Gwendolyn C. Chunn and John May pictured with Jean Pierre Elie. (Right) James A. Gondles, Jr. and Ronald Edwards

whom were vendors with the correctional agencies," May said.

Most of the medical equipment that was collected ended up being surplus that agencies had but could not resell based on U.S. regulations, said Dr. Gondles. "The law prohibits us to sell it. So ... the excess is what we're sending to these countries," she said. In addition, some of the office supplies, such as the computer equipment and office furniture were donated from agencies, including ACA, that had upgraded and no longer needed the slightly older, yet still functional, equipment. "When we no longer can use certain equipment or articles, it makes just a world of difference to people in other settings who are just desperate for some of the kinds of things that we are no longer using," said ACA President Gwendolyn C. Chunn. "It just makes sense. And more importantly, it's such a wonderful gesture of goodwill." New items were also sent in the container, including fans and television sets.

Coordination for sending the container was done, for the most part, by Dr. Gondles. She managed the necessary paperwork and maintained contacts with Haitian officials to help bring the project to fruition. "She was certainly the person who made all this possible," Chunn said. "There's a tremendous amount of coordination that has to occur for something like this to happen. It isn't just a matter of phone calls." Edwards, who also is a member of the International Relations Committee, helped out with the effort too, handling paperwork that had to do with the tax exemptions and other areas to get the supplies and equipment into the country.

As it turns out, collecting the items

to send abroad was much easier than finding the means to physically get the container to Haiti, committee members said. According to Dr. Gondles, "The problem was getting the funding to ship it." Fund-raising efforts began and the International Relations Committee was able to acquire funding from the Green Family Foundation and Armor Correctional Health Services. The Ohio Corrections and Court Services Association, an ACA chapter, also raised funds to help offset the shipping costs.

In total, 123 items were shipped in April 2005 and on May 25, an ACA delegation formally presented the items to officials of the National Penitentiary Administration (also referred to as the Haitian Prison Service), including Jean. The delegation included James Gondles, Chunn and International Relations Committee members Dr. Gondles, Edwards and May. "We were received in the head office of the National Penitentiary where President Chunn gave greetings from the American Correctional Association and officially announced the project and the donation," May said. "We were all present and made presentations as gestures of goodwill between the American Correctional Association and the folks ... who are involved in the Prison Service in Haiti," Chunn added. "People, I believe, associated with the Prison Service were extremely pleased that there were so many usable items that were going to be needed to improve the quality of life there."

Since the National Penitentiary Administration was having such hardships, Jean said, "it was with satisfaction that we received the container." According to Jean, many of the depart-

ments lacked computer equipment, so the 18 donated computers will fill the administration's need. "The mattresses will be sent to the prisons because normally, for the majority of them, there are not any mattresses and the prisoners sleep on the floor," Jean said. "They will be of great use."

The numerous donated chairs and desks will help furnish offices, while the medical equipment such as the X-ray machine and three dental chairs will allow prison officials to meet inmates' medical needs, which they could not afford to do before, according to Jean.

Upon their return from Haiti, members of the ACA delegation expressed their satisfaction in having completed the project, especially given how greatly the nation needed and appreciated the contents of the container. "It's always heartwarming when you give something to people whom you know need whatever it is you're giving," Chunn said. "This is a very, very important project," May added. "It was very rewarding; the end of a long journey. ... I'm very proud that ACA has been able to meet this challenge and assist because it's so desperately needed."

Vanessa St. Gerard is former senior editor of Corrections Today. For more information about the projects mentioned in this article, a workshop titled "The Haitian Prison Restoration Mission" is scheduled to be conducted on Saturday, Aug. 6 during ACA's 135th Congress of Correction in Baltimore.

ACA's Reach Spans the Globe

In April, a shipment stocked with 117 pieces of donated items, ranging from a surgical table and 35 wheelchairs, to an overhead projector and a television set with a DVD player, were sent from Louisiana to the African nation of Tanzania on behalf of the American Correctional Association. The shipment was organized by the ACA International Relations Committee, which sought to send donated equipment to needy prison systems in foreign countries.

The Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections collected the donated items for the shipment, and inmates from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola played a significant role in the project. "The whole thing was inmates. We had to go pick [the equipment] up, so they would go on the trucks and we would go wherever to pick up the medical equipment, bring the equipment here," said Angola Warden Burl Cain. "The inmates loaded it, unloaded it, cleaned it up. They were totally involved. We couldn't have done it without them." The inmates also helped load the supplies into the container in which they were transported.

The shipment to Tanzania, located in eastern Africa, bordering the Indian Ocean, between Kenya and Mozambique, arrived June 10. The equipment will be used to help supply an infirmary at Segotea Prison, outside of the capital, Dar es Salaam. "I think it is the best use of materials that we could ever hope to find," said ACA President Gwendolyn C. Chunn. "It says on some level that we know the plight and the struggles of many places and that we care something about it."

The idea to donate excess materials to the correctional systems of foreign countries such as Tanzania and Haiti came from Cain and Elizabeth Gondles, Ph.D., president of the Institute for Criminal Justice Healthcare — both ACA members. (Gondles is a member of the International Relations Committee.) During a tour of Cain's facility a couple of years ago, they observed some wheelchairs and other equipment that could be put to good use. Gondles eventually brought the idea to the attention of then-President Charles J. Kehoe, who adapted it to the International Relations Committee.

Correctional systems throughout the country have contributed to the efforts to send these much-needed supplies to other countries. "With all the bad press about corrections in our country, this is a way that we can show that American corrections does have a heart," Gondles said. "We feel for our counterparts in other countries."

The International Relations Committee is now looking into sending more supplies to other countries. "That will continue to be addressed at the International Committee meeting and we're already getting calls from other states and agencies interested in providing resources for it," said Committee Chair John May. "It's the kind of thing that I hope they'll continue to do," Chunn said. "I think it's a very worthwhile humanitarian effort and it says loads about the character of this organization and the people who belong to it."



Items that were sent to Tanzania were picked up, cleaned and loaded by inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.